

ARCHIVAL RECORD – SOURCE METADATA PAGE

Collection: Gene W. Poor Digital Archive

File Name: 2014_costcoconnection_movingexperience_lifeformations_final.pdf

Publication / Source: *The Costco Connection*

Type of Material: Magazine Feature

Pages Included: Cover; pages 66–67; back cover

Title of Work: *A Moving Experience – LifeFormations Leads Animatronics Industry*

Author / Reporter: Sarah Miller

Publisher / Organization: Costco Wholesale Corporation

Place of Publication: Issaquah, Washington

Date of Publication: November 2014

Captured By: Dr. Gene W. Poor

Date Captured / Scanned: November 2025

Description / Subject:

A feature article on LifeFormations, the animatronics studio founded by Dr. Gene W. Poor. The story highlights how LifeFormations blends engineering, sculpture, programming, and storytelling to create lifelike robotic figures used in theme parks, museums, visitor centers, retail environments, trade shows, and corporate training facilities around the world.

Summary:

This *Costco Connection* feature examines how LifeFormations' work merges art and technology to produce high-realism animatronic characters that engage, educate, and entertain audiences globally. Through interviews, behind-the-scenes insights, and industry examples, the article explains how LifeFormations became a creative leader in lifelike figure production—demonstrating the studio's impact on themed entertainment, brand experiences, and educational exhibits.

Digitized and preserved for educational and historical reference by Dr. Gene W. Poor, November 2025.

Rights / Ownership:

Original magazine copyright © 2014 Costco Wholesale Corporation. Scanned under fair use for educational and historical documentation.

THE COSTCO CONNECTION

November 2014 • Volume 29 • Number 11

A lifestyle magazine for Costco members



Home (page) for the holidays

Great gifts and
more at Costco.com **30**



PPSRT STD
U.S. Postage
Paid
Hembsburg, PA
Permit #186

George Bush portrait **37** • Chocolates at Costco **78** • Honoring our vets **114**



A moving experience

LifeFormations leads animatronics industry

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LIFEFORMATIONS

Above: Gene Poor (center) with some of LifeFormation's whimsical and realistic creations, showcasing the company's attention to detail. Below: *Sesame Street*'s Ernie.



By Sarah Miller

IN FORT LAUDERDALE, Florida, a 40-foot shark with dagger-like choppers looms over visitors at the Museum of Discovery and Science. Its hauntingly realistic three rows of teeth elicit fear and awe from museum guests. That means the shark has done its job—and so has the imaginative team of LifeFormations.

Gene Poor, Costco member and LifeFormations founder, fuses art and technology into animatronics (the technology behind the creation of robotic, moving figures, as well as the figures themselves).

You've likely seen the company's animatronics and lifelike static figures inside theme parks such as Walt Disney World and Universal Studios, or in world-class museums, resorts and restaurants. Magician David Copperfield has even commissioned animatronic pieces for his private island.

LifeFormation's creations span the globe, from domestic attractions like Dollywood in Tennessee, where visitors battle animatronic gophers with water guns in the River Battle flume ride, to Universal Studios Singapore, with *Sesame Street*'s Burt and Ernie. LifeFormations is one of just a handful of

companies in the animatronics industry; only about a half dozen exist in the United States, according to Poor.

A career in movement

LifeFormations has two locations: one in Bowling Green, Ohio, and a second in Cincinnati, Ohio—not where you'd expect to find an animatronics company, Poor admits. But Poor, a professor of entrepreneurship with a Ph.D. in higher education, started a new visual communications technology program in 1972 at Bowling Green State University. He wanted his new company to be located within yards of the campus.

Creativity and technology are two things Poor's always excelled at. As a child, he built his own self-setting bowling alley in his aunt's basement, so it was no surprise that these traits would spur his animatronics business. His journey started while he was building industrial trade show exhibits for Good Displays, a Toledo, Ohio, company, in 1984.

"Every time I'd go to these trade shows, it always occurred to me how people could easily walk past exhibits and never even see them," Poor says. "I call it exhibit fatigue."

Many o
creating
as Disn
to the r

He l
animat
stop peo
them so
Moveme

On
let him s
ters, Po
1984: Th
for the
glass co
booth, a

"Ne
for our
operatin
that sat u

Poor
company
split fro
business
talent. "I
do anim
the indu

Poor
"We're k

Meticu

Crea
ple laug
Formati
designer
produce
sculptur

"We
of our ch
sands of
of clay, p
silicone.

Auth
thetic ey
hand, an
example,
created a
as a prom

"For
spots, be
Our desig
he [was],
prototyp
quently s

On a
tiple proj
often wo
domain.
colored
famous si
while an
electric s

Many of LifeFormations's projects include creating characters for theme parks, such as Disney World, Universal, and the ones to the right at Dollywood.

He knew he could cure the "fatigue" with animatronics. "I told the owner, you've got to stop people to sell them. You've got to show them something they've never seen before. Movement works!"

Once he finally convinced the company to let him start a new division that builds characters, Poor put together his first creation in 1984: *The Pink Panther's* Inspector Clouseau for the Toledo-based Owens Corning fiberglass company. Crowds swarmed the trade booth, and Poor quickly grew a following.

"Next, I created an entire talking hospital for our client Honeywell," he says. "A talking operating room, X-ray machine and a patient that sat up and blinked."

Poor ultimately purchased the trade show company's animatronics division in 1990 and split from the company to run it as his own business, assembling some of the nation's best talent. "I investigated all the companies that do animatronics," he says. "I wanted to learn the industry and market my business."

Poor quickly found his industry niche. "We're known for our realistic look," he says.

Meticulous magic

Creating realistic figures that make people laugh or scream is painstaking. LifeFormations' 50 employees include sculptors, designers, scriptwriters and technicians who produce not only animatronics, but also static sculptures and interactive exhibits.

"We have to make a head mold for each of our characters," Poor says. "We have thousands of head molds." A figure is sculpted out of clay, placed in a mold and ultimately set in silicone. "It's very art-driven," Poor says.

Authenticity is achieved by using prosthetic eyes and teeth. Each hair is inserted by hand, and every detail obsessively studied. For example, Poor, a huge Thomas Edison fan, created an animatronic version of the inventor as a promotional piece for his company.

"For Thomas Edison we applied age spots, beard stubble and hand-poked hair. Our designer knows costume history, how tall he [was], his chest and waist size." His Edison prototype worked, and several were subsequently sold to museums across the country.

On any given day, the team juggles multiple projects. Each employee has a specialty, often working independently in his or her domain. In one room, a sculptor uses skin-colored clay to form the delicate nose of a famous singer. In the next room, music blares while another team member takes a small electric saw to foam, a subtractive sculpting



technique used to form a body.

"Each person has a specific skill," Poor says, "and, 99 percent of the time, our projects enter as just an idea—these guys have to figure out how to do it. Casey BirkinCamp over here does robotics. He's given a movement list—eye blink, torso turn, arm movement, head turn—and he makes the parts from scratch. It's really an art."

Holding the little cartoon creature in the palm of his hand, Poor laughs and turns to BirkinCamp, saying, "You're going to fit all those moves into this little creature. How are you going to do that?"

The robotics expert responds, laughing, "I don't know yet." These creative challenges are part of the job—merging art with technology.

Sparking life

The animatronic figures are computer controlled and create movement through single or multiple combinations of different technologies: pneumatic, electrical and hydraulic. Poor says pneumatic, which uses air pressure to create movement, is their most commonly used method.

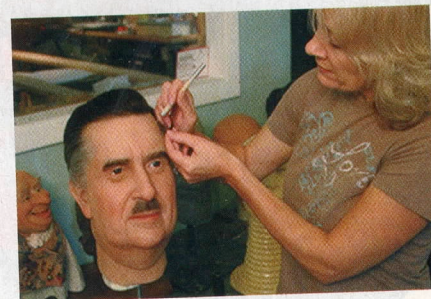
Finally, a script is written, a voice talent records the audio and the programmer brings the animation to life—"an art in itself," Poor says, "If it touches people's heart, mind and funny bone, you have everything."

Today, most of LifeFormations' work is overseas, as the theme park industry is bigger outside the U.S.; the group recently completed characters for a new ride in Germany's Europa-Park called Arthur in the Minimoys Kingdom, which takes guests on an adventure based on the *Arthur* series of books and movies by Luc Besson.

So the next time you find yourself immersed in a world of fantasy at a theme park or are suddenly standing face to face with Thomas Edison, Poor's imagination is likely involved. [E]

Sarah Miller is a national freelance journalist and Costco member.

Below: No detail is too small, whether it involves adding texture to the "skin" or creating a headful of hair, one strand at a time.



In our digital editions
Click here for a behind-the-scenes clip of LifeFormations in action. (See page 14 for details.)

MEMBERPROFILE

Business name: LifeFormations

Founder: Gene Poor, with Tom Suter and Tom Keubler

Founded: 1990

Number of Employees: 50

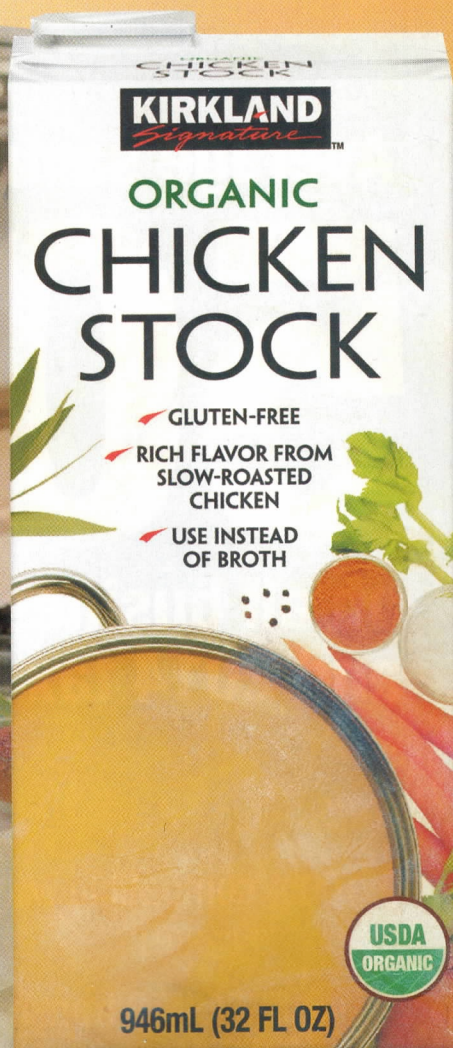
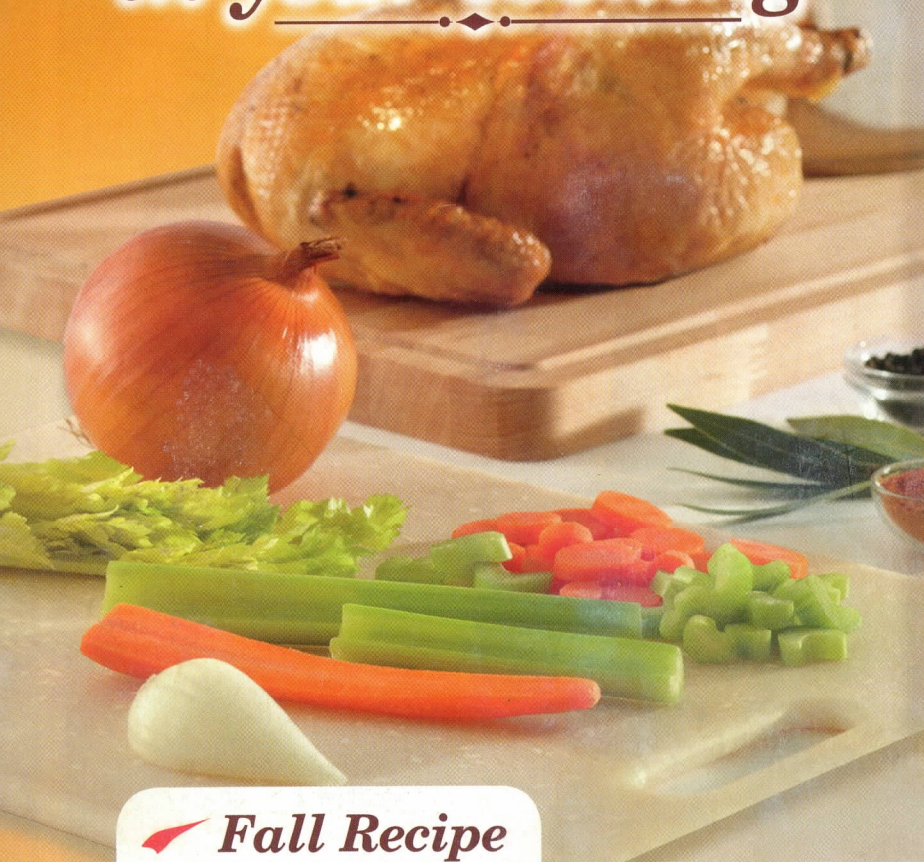
Headquarters: 2029 Woodbridge Blvd., Bowling Green, OH 43402

Phone: (513) 246-0058

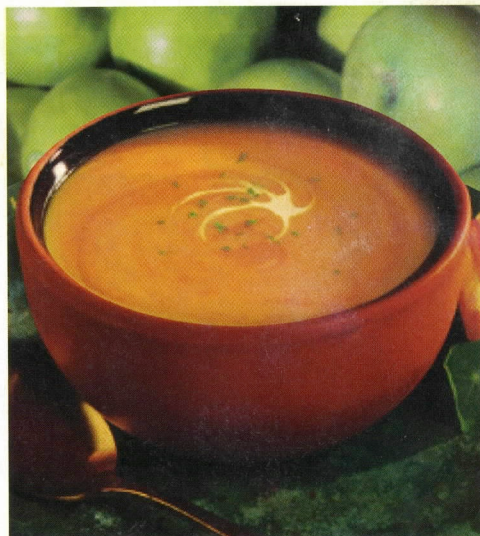
Website: lifeformations.com

Comments about Costco: "I love the variety of products and the way Costco stays on top of technological changes. My biggest surprise was how helpful the Costco people were in fitting me with my hearing aids. Now if I would just wear them!"—Gene Poor

Take Stock in your cooking



Fall Recipe



Curried Butternut Squash Soup

Preparation Time: 1 Hour

Servings: 8

Ingredients

- | | |
|--|---|
| 2 butternut squash, sliced in half lengthwise, seeds removed | 2 carrots, peeled and diced |
| 1 to 2 tablespoons Kirkland Signature Extra Virgin Olive Oil | 1 large yellow onion, diced |
| 4 tablespoons butter | 1 teaspoon curry powder |
| 3 Granny Smith apples, peeled and diced | 32-fl. oz. Kirkland Signature Organic Chicken Stock |
| 2 celery stalks, diced | 1 cup heavy cream |
| | Kirkland Signature Pure Sea Salt |
| | Kirkland Signature Malabar Black Pepper |

Preparation

Preheat oven to 350°F. Line rimmed baking sheet with foil. Rub squash with Kirkland Signature Extra Virgin Olive Oil and place, cut side up, on lined baking sheet. Roast until tender and slightly browned, about 30 minutes. Melt butter in large sauté pan. Add apples, celery, carrots, onion and curry powder. Sauté until soft. Scoop squash from skins into large stockpot. Add sautéed vegetables, apples and Kirkland Signature Organic Chicken Stock. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer 20 minutes. Remove from heat. Using blender, blend until smooth. Return to low heat. Add cream and heat through. Do not boil. Season to taste with Kirkland Signature Pure Sea Salt and Malabar Black Pepper.



Exclusively from Costco Wholesale

WAREHOUSE ONLY | AVAILABLE NOW
Item #516822